

Food and Table Fellowship

Sam Cohen (she/her/hers)

Hi my name is Sam Cohen and I use the pronouns she/her/hers. Today we are going to be discussing food and table fellowship in the New Testament.

Part of what distinguished Jewish people from Gentiles and other groups was their food restrictions. According to the Torah, there are various types of meats a Jew cannot consume, but what starkly distinguished the Jews from other groups at the time was their abstinence from pork (Freidenreich, 2011, 650). Some Jewish people, mostly those who embraced Hellenistic culture, believed that the food laws were allegorical to moral laws (Freidenreich, 2011, 650). For example, Jewish law requires that Jews only eat animals with split hooves and animals that chew their cud. Some early scholars believed that the split hooves represented the distinction in decision making between what is right and what is wrong (Freidenreich, 2011, 650). Although the allegorical representation was important it did not outweigh the literal interpretation of the dietary laws for most Jews. Dietary laws remain a major part of rabbinic Judaism and there are major sections of the Mishnah dedicated to discussing it (Freidenreich, 2011, 650). However, some Jews argued that food laws only had to be observed allegorically (Cohen, 594). These beliefs eventually would cause them to identify with Christianity (Cohen, 594).

Jesus and his disciples followed Jewish dietary norms. However, Jesus places a greater emphasis on consuming food in moral purity rather than consuming food in ritual purity (Freidenreich, 2011, 650). Groups like the Pharisees emphasized ritualistic purity, so they were critical of the way Jesus and his disciples failed to always adhere to that aspect of purity.

In Jewish tradition, fasting was used as a way to appeal to God's mercy by getting him to pity them or as a form of repentance to receive forgiveness (Freidenreich, 2011, 650). Jesus' followers practiced fasting in moderation because Jesus was critical of excessive fasting and using fasting to gain pity from others. According to Jesus' teachings fasting should only involve the person fasting and God (Freidenreich, 2011, 651).

The “Lord’s Supper” is the most significant meal featured in the New Testament (Freidenreich, 2011, 651). In Christianity, the reenactment of this meal is a central ritual. The purpose of the meal is to unite believers by remembering Jesus’ death. This is achieved through communal worship (Freidenreich, 2011, 651). The main elements of the meal are the bread and wine which Jesus equates to his body and blood respectively (Freidenreich, 2011, 651)(Matthew 26:7, 26:8). This is significant because it emphasizes the theme in the Bible of ingesting God’s words (Freidenreich, 2011, 651).

Table fellowship and food come up often in the New Testament. Often in the Gospels Jesus uses food imagery as part of his parables. His disciples and other leaders in Jesus’ movement often use table fellowship as a way to promote collectivism and unite believers (Freidenreich, 2011, 650).

Table fellowship was heavily emphasized in Jewish communities. This was because they saw eating together as a way to strengthen social bonds and promote discussion (Freidenreich, 2011, 652). Outsiders and exiles of the community were not allowed to participate in group meals. Paul, however, believed that Jews and Gentiles should be allowed to eat together without distinction (Freidenreich, 2011, 652). He believed that if both believed in Christ, they should be allowed to eat together. Peter also rejects the practice of abstaining from meals with the Gentiles. He does this based upon a vision he received in which he is instructed to eat animals forbidden by the Torah. He interpreted this to mean that he should not distinguish between Jews and Gentiles (Freidenreich, 2011, 652). This is significant because many works at the time taught that Jewish people should neither eat food with or eat food prepared by Gentiles (Freidenreich, 2011, 652). However, there was no real consensus of whether or not Jews and Gentiles should eat together.

Jesus adhered to tradition, but according to Matthew he envisioned a time where all of the faithful would eat together in the Kingdom of Heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Freidenreich, 2011, 652) (Matthew 8:11). It is unlikely that Jesus did eat with Gentiles however, because none of his earlier followers were reported sharing meals with Gentiles (Freidenreich, 2011, 652). The gospels depict Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners however, they do not explicitly say that Jesus ate with Gentiles

Bibliography

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